

Comfort and Demand
Isaiah 40:1-11
Matthew 2:1-11

Broad Street Presbyterian Church
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I do not ordinarily like to use a sermon as a commercial, but this evening at 8:00 P.M. something very special will happen in this Sanctuary. As I have overheard various components rehearsed last week, my appetite has been whetted. And I urge you, unapologetically, to be here this evening to experience George Frederick Handel's Messiah.

If you ~~are~~^{in the} here you will notice that the first voice will sing words of the Old Testament Lesson this morning. Couched very delicately and gently the tenor voice will announce ("Comfort ye, comfort ye, my people, saith your God.") Handel chose his theology well, for that is perhaps the dominant Advent theme: God is about to intercede in the history of His people: God is about to do something that will be redeeming and healing and comforting. The theology of Isaiah 40 is Christmas theology, and as Christians we maintain that God did act redemptively centuries later in the birth of Jesus Christ.

But there is an intriguing story behind the ancient words the familiar and yet relevant story of the Exile. So let us go back through history to the sixth century B.C. Two geographical points are important: Jerusalem and Babylon. Jerusalem was in ruins; ^{city +} the temple destroyed ^{by Babylonian armies} as a result of a very foolish military adventure. Jeremiah had warned that it would happen, but he had added the promise that through the disaster God would restore what had been destroyed, and that God's people would be re-established on the basis of a new covenant. But then history took one of those curious twists which upsets everything. The victorious Babylonians did not perform according to the script. Rather than occupying the land and exacting severe tribute, they carried off the leaders of Judah to Babylon.

the aristocracy, politicians, priests. | The idea was a good one and it almost worked. | Rather than allowing the Jews to retain their deep ties to the land and the culture, their captors counted on them being assimilated into Babylonian culture. | They were given a minimum of freedom in Babylon: what military might could never do, time would accomplish. | The Jews, for their part, settled down in their exiled captivity to wait. | Jeremiah had promised - God would do something. - - - - -

And then nothing: | fifty years of waiting: | five decades of silence. | That's a long time to wait: | transpose it to the twentieth century: | 1924: | an intolerably long time to wait for anything. | But beyond the sheer length of the wait, the implications of the exile often, I think, elude us. | At the time, a nation which was defeated militarily and whose sacred Temple was sacked was shown to be a nation with a false God. | In the ancient Near East it was believed that the gods did battle: | and that when the Jews were humiliated by their enforced exile it was God - Jahweh - who suffered the ultimate defeat. | And so there was more to that exile than inconvenience and homesickness. | It was a theological crisis.

Fifty years of waiting. | Fifty years of silence: | a whole generation of Jews died in the interim. | I see bearded old men pouring over the Psalms and the Prophets, hoping against hope that their history wasn't ^a fluke. | I hear the words of Psalms 137, that nostalgic lament:

"By the waters of Babylon,

there we sat down and wept,

When we remembered Zion.

How shall we sing the Lord's song in a foreign land?"

I see young men with families, tired of waiting, tired of talking about waiting, tired of the sentimental piety of old men.

But then the silence was broken. | Someone back in burned-out Jerusalem saw a vision and wrote a letter, and somehow that letter got all the way across the desert to the exiled community in Babylon. | We don't know who the writer was, only that his letter is attached to the words of an earlier prophet and occupies the 40th through the 55th chapter of the Book of Isaiah. The first statement he addressed to those lonely exiles was:

"Comfort, comfort my people,
Says your God.
Speak tenderly to Jerusalem
and cry to her that her
Warfare is ended: that her
iniquity is pardoned, that she
has received from the Lord's
hand double for all her sins."

If you are a captive, an old man waiting, that is very good news. | Literally, in the nick of time, God's word comes to you as hope for the future. | God is not dead - He has not been defeated - He still reigns - the promise will be kept. | To a depressed and captive people that is very comforting to know.

But then the prophet talks about some kind of strange highway through the desert; | valleys filled up and mountains brought low. | Those are road building terms, and it sounded to the exiled Jews as if God's comfort carried with it the demand for some rather strenuous labor: | hard, risky and dangerous work. | It's one thing to hear that God is alive and well: | it's another thing altogether to pick up family and belongings and start walking through the wilderness.

And I can see those young family men, with friends in Babylon and blossoming careers, dragging their feet a bit. | Edmund Steimle has them say: ["strange comfort! | To make a highway in the wilderness! | Good God! | Wasn't Babylon bad enough? | At least we're making ends meet, the children are in school...and we have security! | And we are expected to throw all that over for a crazy highway in the wilderness? | Out of the frying pan into the fire? | What kind of comfort is this?"] (The Protestant Hour, December 1970. P. 12-13)

Their forefathers, of course, had said the same thing. | They were captives in Egypt: | and a man by the name of Moses came up with a hair-brain scheme about walking right out - right through the Red Sea and up through Sinai. | Hearing the comfortable assertion that God is alive and well is one thing, but this business about walking through the wilderness was a bit more than they bargained for.

That is a major Biblical theme that keeps happening to God's people over and over again. | God speaks a good word, and just as His people sit back to enjoy it they find themselves out on a limb with Pharaoh - or the Babylonians - or someone else sawing away: | out on the limb with nothing but a handful of vague promises to break the fall. | The Bible is full of that strange comfort. Just as men start to enjoy the warm glow of God's love and their own salvation, they find themselves picked up by the scruff of the neck and pushed out into the wilderness. | Put in more proper term, salvation in the Bible is never an end in itself, an idea even the most rigidly Biblical Christians seem loathe to acknowledge. | God saves men in order to use them in the work He is doing: | and that work is notorious for happening out there where it is not very secure: where the landscape is uncharted: | where there are dangers and risks.

And so we approach Christmas, the event in which God spoke and acted in a way that perhaps would have surprised even the prophet. And the word for us is the same: comfort and demand, only we're not particularly interested in venturing out into the wilderness at this time of year any more than those exiles were.

Christmas is comforting in an important and profound way. There is a goodness and hope about the birth of Jesus Christ that addresses something deep inside all of us: something which we need. To read the newspaper today is to be concerned about the future. Men are still enthusiastically dispatching each other on every continent. And in what is surely one of the most ironic exercises in relativity (we heave a sigh of relief when our Secretary of State ~~came to an understanding~~ with the Russians on Arms Limitation last week, that generously allows both us and them a nuclear arsenal capable of obliterating each other fifteen times over.

And that is not all. Change is happening so rapidly within our own culture that we often feel like exiles in a foreign land. Margaret Meade has observed that anyone born before the Second World War is an immigrant: the natives are our children. And James Reston, writing in the New York Times several years ago put his finger on perhaps the lasting tragedy of the 1970's - "There is a sense of....helplessness and doubt about the fidelity of our institutions. This is something new in our national life - something very dangerous to the American character..." (Oct. 28, 1970; cited by Steimle, ob cite p.11)

So we welcome December 25 as Balm in Gilead. We need to be reminded that God is alive and there is hope for the human race. We need to know that love is built into the universe and that the birth of a child twenty centuries ago still means that God identifies with us.

In a world that changes so rapidly we can't keep up, there is comfort - necessary comfort in a celebration that is familiar. There is something reassuring about a Currier and Ives print of a New England Church on Christmas Eve, bundled families walking through clean snow. There is something reassuring and good about singing ("Away in the Manger") with the children and remembering how it used to be sung with one's own parents.

Christmas does comfort us: Christmas meets a deeply felt need: Christmas is needed reassurance that some things have not changed and will not change.

And it is very tempting to leave it at this - which is what a lot of people will do. The Christmas season will be a pleasant intrusion of nostalgia, good will and generosity. It might be possible to stop there except for one thing - that strange highway in the desert; that insistent Biblical theme that keeps demanding that men walk in the wilderness once they've enjoyed their comfort. We would prefer to confine the celebration to an observance of a tender birth story, but we can't do that in integrity. Because the Babe of Bethlehem grew up and when He did He started talking about things like peace and love and sacrifice and brotherhood.

The Wise Men were the first to experience it. They came to the Bethlehem manger to welcome a child. They cemented themselves securely into tradition by bringing gold, frankincense and myrrh. Their Advent was spent anticipating, traveling, and it was consummated in an unforgettable experience in a stable. And then....they had to take another way home. They couldn't go by the main road which led to Herod's palace. Having seen the child, there was now danger and risk and grave responsibility. Christmas for them meant the necessity of pushing out into the desert on an unknown route.

I can remember being offended as a child to hear the minister talking about the triumphal entry to Jerusalem and the crucifixion at Christmas time. I remember wanting to hear about stars and angels and lambs and resenting it when he talked about conflict and suffering and death. And as a seminary student newly acquainted with the lectionary, a list of scripture lessons assigned to each Sunday of the year, I remember my surprise in discovering that the lesson for the first Sunday in Advent was the Palm Sunday narrative.

I have learned subsequently the rightness and wisdom of that choice. For that is how it is with the Christ Child. What began at Bethlehem leads to the Cross: it is not far from manger to calvary. To go to the manger and return by the same route is to miss the point. For Jesus Christ the man calls his people to follow Him out into a wilderness world - our wilderness, where men and women are hurting, where poor people are getting poorer, where children die of malnutrition.

In the midst of the Cold War mentality Bishop G. Bromley Oxnam of the Methodist Church preached a powerful Christmas sermon. His words probed deeply in 1955 and they still address us with penetrating relevance. Listen to what he said: "Mankind must choose. There is a way begun in Bethlehem that will yet lead to the healing of nations and the salvation of my soul. ^{But,} The materialism of Marx cannot be beaten down by men whose materialism puts things before men. The atheism of Marx cannot be destroyed by men who act as though God were not relevant to our economic and social life. Mankind must choose. It is not a matter of piling gifts at the feet of Mary's son. It is a matter of giving our hearts to the Son of God". (Best Sermons 1955 Edition, P.117)

We are on our way to Christmas - to comfort, reassurance, good will and good cheer. But Christmas is no more our destination than the Bethlehem stable was for the Magi. Rather it is for us, as it was for them, the point of departure. Using the prophet's idiom, it is the beginning of a road through the wilderness. Using a more personal idiom, it is a time to reflect on God's love, God's mercy, God's complete identification with us - and then to rededicate ourselves to the risky assignment of following God's son on whatever road He chooses to lead us.

Comfort and demand: celebration and sacrifice: salvation and hard work. That is the rhythm of the Gospel of Jesus Christ on this and every day.

"For to us a Child is born,
to us a son is given:
and the government will be upon his shoulder,
and his name will be called,
Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God,
Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace"

Amen.

Our Father, we are on the way to Bethlehem. We're getting ready to feel better about ourselves and each other and the world than we have felt all year. We are grateful for that. We are grateful for the warmth and love and comfort of this season. But help us, Father, to see beyond the manger to the cross. Irritate us, even now, with your insistent demand, so that we follow along the road of service and love and courage and sacrifice. Through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen.